

Secondary use of mystery visitor data from a consumer organisation to assess general practitioners performance.

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Background

To improve general practitioners (GP) service quality their actual performance level has to be assessed. Direct observation of routine GP performance USING actors is an established method in quality management. Consumer organizations frequently assess the quality of services in various industries through USE OF mystery shoppers. the use of data collected in this way by consumer organizations may provide a new low cost evaluation method.

Methods

We gathered data from a consumer organization's assessment of GPs preventive care in Vienna, Austria. We examined this data to determine how representative, reliable and valid it was in evaluating quality on the regional service level. We judged representativeness by comparing characteristics of the GP sample with administrative data. Reliability and validity of data were assessed by analysing the measurements methods of the consumer organisation.

Results

The 42 mystery visits were a reliable and valid form of data collection. The GP sample was well balanced in regard to catchment area and GP insurance status. The sample size was in the range reported by a recent systematic review on studies using incognito standardised patients. First analysis showed that GP communication time of 46 minutes (95% CI 37-54 minutes exceeded expectations. However in less than half of visits (38%, CI 19% - 56%) history taking was performed at acceptable levels.

Conclusions

Data from mystery visits by consumer organizations may provide a new low cost source of evidence on GP performance. Analysis of the secondary dataset allowed 95 performance variables per visit crucial aspects of preventive care to be assessed. Where other systematic data on health service performance are not available, data from consumer organisations may provide evidence to evaluate and further improve preventive GP service delivery in a region.